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Letter to the Editor

COVID-19 online surveys need to follow standards and guidelines: Comment on “does COVID-19 pandemic affect sexual behavior? A cross-sectional, cross-national online survey” and “binge watching behavior during COVID 19 pandemic: A cross-sectional, cross-national online survey”-authors’ reply

Dear Editor,

We thank authors (Sharma and Tikka, 2020) for raising important challenges to conduct formal studies during this COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma and Tikka, 2020). It is important to note that the pandemic has devastatingly affected almost every sphere of human life in almost every country in the world. It has challenged the existing health systems and destroyed the daily protocols of life. Both the developed and the developing countries have been struggling to cope with the virus. Moreover, developing countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal have additional challenges such as resource constraints, accessible mental health care, multi-sectoral coordination, a load of people with special conditions, stigma, and ethical aspects in research (De Sousa et al., 2020). Furthermore, some of the aspects of the COVID-19 virus are yet to be revealed. Lots of studies have been coming out every day to measure the sufferings of humans and to improve the quality of life. This letter aimed to explain the arguments raised by Sharma and Tikka (2020), regarding the ethical aspects of the online survey during this COVID-19 pandemic with special attention to the mentioned papers of Arafat et al. (2020) and Dixit et al., (2020).

Firstly, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown period involving the three different countries (Arafat et al., 2020). Thus, institutional review board permission was not taken and even not feasible in countries like Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. Notably, we firmly believe ethical approval would be an ideal step to follow as mentioned by the authors. However, there was a strong possibility that this study would not be conducted during this emergency period if we tried to get ethical approval from these three different countries. One article recommended that during the emergency period of this COVID-19 the ethical clearance is a challenging issue and could be modified (De Sousa et al., 2020). Thus, we did not mention the information. Also, we felt as a researcher to address the social issue that is affecting each and everyone in the society. However, authors were duly concerned regarding the ethical aspects. The ethical issues like confidentiality, the rights of participants to drop out from the survey any time they wish, informed consent that no harm to them would occur were all ensured. Moreover, we planned to publish it as a letter to the editor (not as a full-length paper).

Secondly, the article clearly mentions that the instrument was created by the investigators after referring to the available literature and not validated by the author panel based on the research question. Therefore, it was not referenced. It is easily identifiable if the paper is read with full attention. There is no obligatory rule that every instrument has to be validated. Surprisingly, we wonder how a validated instrument could be used in another language to assess responses from three different countries. The authors' claim could not be rationalized in case this study and could not be supported by evidence of validation

procedures (Arafat et al., 2016). This is clearly mentioned as a limitation also. Sharma and Tikka, (2020) could think about the matter with logical reasoning that how a validated instrument could be used in three different countries.

Thirdly, the article was published as a letter that has a word limit restriction. However, the methods were fairly mentioned within the limited word format. We do not understand the necessity of mentioning the messenger platforms. The Google form link was forwarded conveniently which is clearly mentioned. And also in the limitation section, it is mentioned that the sampling was purposive, the sample size was small (120), respondents were from three different countries (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal), then how sensible it is to mention detail geographical distribution in a letter with such small sample size and huge area? The term cross-national was used because the study collected responses from three different countries.

Fourthly, different study methods have different strengths and weaknesses which is not an exception for the “Google form” platform for surveys. During this pandemic, thousands of studies have been coming out with the same procedure. Yes, we agree that could be a weakness which is generalized for all “Google form” surveys, not a fundamental and specific weakness of this study. It is mentioned that we check the data for any sort of duplication. However, we didn't have the intent to check the IP addresses, and also for the sake of confidentiality, we didn't record the email addresses.

Fifthly, in the methodology, it is clearly mentioned that those consented for the study could submit the response. We only see the submitted responses. We don't understand the basis of asking the response rate for this study, which is not justifiable particularly in the context of online surveys (as through snow-ball technique, the survey link is passed on to subsequent contacts). However, it is very relevant, when the survey is conducted in the door to door survey through face-to-face interviews.

Sixthly, the study has collaborators from multiple countries; however, the authors seem to be interested in the Indian authors and Indian guidelines. We sincerely ask the authors that what the authors of other countries could do.

We do believe, every author should consider the ethical aspects of research and we also believe that there is a need to think about the context of the study. Constructive criticism is a fundamental aspect of the advancement of science and we do appreciate it. However, we need to consider again and again how constructive our criticism is and how it would contribute to science.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113211](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113211).

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